

Keynote Address: Improving the health of our world through increased fruit and vegetable consumption

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I am pleased to be here to address this first International 5 A Day Symposium. It is energizing to see representatives from more than 20 countries coming together to learn from each other's successes and failures and to build better and healthier nations around the world. The United States' 5 A Day for Better Health Program is an important nationwide nutrition programme, representing a public-private partnership between the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and Produce for Better Health (PBH). The programme has shown how successful public, private and public-private partnerships can be and we believe 5 A Day is a model for other countries to follow.

The 'Take the 5 A Day Challenge' has increased enthusiasm, public awareness and spread the nutrition message throughout the country. The 5 A Day Program comes to life at the community level, where ultimately the issues of good health, nutrition and quality health care must be dealt with. So, for many reasons, 5 A Day is an example of a stellar programme that should be emulated even further throughout the country and throughout the world.

Partnerships are important, because the governments cannot change behaviours by themselves – it takes a collective effort. The US 5 A Day Program enabled the fruit and vegetable industry to work with federal health agencies to reach a common objective. The 5 A Day Coordinating Committee serves as 'the scientific voice to the public' and provides nationwide leadership that translates into programmes at the local level. When federal, state and local governments, private industries, philanthropic organizations, communities and civic and religious groups unite for a common goal, there is no limit to what can be done.

I recently delivered the keynote address that celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Framingham Heart Study. That study taught us that consuming fatty foods, living a sedentary lifestyle, increasing obesity and smoking all contribute to cardiovascular

disease. Our understanding of the role of nutrition in general, and fruits and vegetables in particular, in preventing chronic diseases has increased since Framingham started. Nevertheless, we still must do better in terms of nutrition and our consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Why is 5 A Day so critical now?

Dietary factors are associated with four of the leading causes of death in the USA: coronary heart disease, some types of cancer, stroke and type 2 diabetes mellitus. Yet, Americans still consume too few fruits and vegetables. Too few persons with high blood pressure – a chronic condition that can be controlled with diet and exercise – are diagnosed and treated, and too few have their blood pressure controlled. Right now, we estimate that 50 million people in America have high blood pressure, but only 34 million know it. Of those who know it, only 27 million seek treatment. And of those who seek treatment, only half get the problem under control. Similarly, too few diabetics are diagnosed and adequately treated with diet, physical activity and medication. Too few physicians are putting prevention into practice.

The rate of obesity in this country is at an all-time high, especially among teenagers and children. Thirty-six per cent of adults and 14% of teenagers are obese. Action is required to redress this alarming trend. However, no state in the USA mandates physical education in grades K–12. We simply have too few healthy communities.

Five A Day and the Surgeon General's priorities

Just after being sworn in this past February, my staff and I set out to develop the major areas of emphasis during my tenure as Surgeon General and Assistant Secretary for Health. We identified several evolving priorities, some of which I would like to briefly share with you this morning. It is important to note that 5 A Day cuts across all of the priorities in a significant way.

Every child should be given the opportunity for a healthy start in life

Getting a healthy start in life means several things, particularly having access to nutritious foods, including fresh fruits, vegetables and grains. We know that the mother's eating habits greatly affect her babies' start in life. We must educate women about the risks of maternal iron deficiency during pregnancy, which increases the risk of preterm delivery and delivering a low birth weight infant. We must encourage them to select iron-rich foods and supplements with iron during pregnancy.

We also know that children who eat more nutritious foods and who have a balanced diet are less likely to be overweight, a growing concern for children and teenagers in this country. We know that good nutrition can reduce the onset of

cavities in children and adults. We are in the process of developing a Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health to improve the nation's oral health. We must begin establishing healthful behaviours for both diet and physical activity in our children so that they can be maintained throughout adulthood. Families, schools, day care centres – even supermarkets and fast food restaurants – can play a major role in assuring healthy starts for children.

Promoting healthy lifestyles

We are committed to the promotion of healthy lifestyles through nutrition education. That means encouraging people to eat fresh fruits and vegetables – at least five servings per day – and to cut back on fat intake and increase fibre consumption. Science has taught us that eating five servings of fruits and vegetables a day will reduce the risk of chronic diseases, including certain types of cancer and heart disease. Now, we just need to make that a part of our daily routine.

Promoting healthy lifestyles means paying greater attention to physical activity. We have found that if we can get people who are sedentary up and moving for 30 min a day, 5 days a week, we could greatly enhance the health of the nation.

Communicating with the American people about the health care system and how best to access it for themselves and their families

Today's health care system must evolve into a community health system that is accessible to all. Such a system must also provide access to preventive care that involves diet modification, nutrition counselling and education services. But not all segments of the population have sufficient access to care. As we search for a community health system that works, we must be mindful that managed care alone is neither the answer to our health system's problem nor the villain which we make it out to be. We need a system that better balances prevention on the one hand, and medical intervention on the other. As a nation, we need more investment in community-based prevention.

Improving mental health in the nation

No priority yet has generated as much interest and enthusiasm as this one on mental health. We must remove the blame and stigmatization that surrounds mental health in this nation. We know that poor diets and obesity are linked to social isolation and that people become despondent over their appearance. Further, physical appearance can also be responsible for unemployment and underemployment, and can affect the individual, their family, their communities and society at large.

We must improve our mental health system to one of caring and support so that we can get on with the business of developing sound strategies for suicide and violence prevention. Mental health problems often relate to other serious health

problems, including substance abuse and violence. Our efforts must be aimed at detecting mental illnesses early and at finding effective suicide prevention strategies.

Earlier this month, we held the first-ever national conference on suicide prevention, where we pulled together survivors, family members of people who committed suicide, health care professionals and government officials under one roof to discuss prevention strategies. From that, we plan to issue a Surgeon General's Conference Report on Suicide, which will be followed by a Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health.

Global health is an issue of growing concern for all nations

We cannot protect or improve the health of our communities without thinking globally. Our public health perspective calls for new and innovative global partnerships. Because we live in a global village, we must work together with other nations as global partners to improve world health overall. Thanks to astonishing advances in technology, transportation and international trade, and the passing of 2 million people crossing international borders each day, we find ourselves intricately connected with the rest of the world.

We are vigilant in our concern for ensuring a safe food and blood supply and in monitoring threats of bioterrorism throughout the world. We have identified four areas of global health concern: polio eradication; emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, bioterrorism, and food and blood safety; violence; and tobacco prevention and control.

Issues surrounding the global food supply are of concern to all nations. An increasing amount of the food eaten in most countries originates in other countries. Methods of growing and handling food and the prevalence of enteric infections in food handlers may increase the contamination in some of these countries. Likewise, much contamination takes place in this country.

Eliminating disparities

Overriding all of these topics is eliminating disparities in health. Back in February 1998, the President unveiled his Initiative on Race and Health. In it, he announced a goal of eliminating racial disparities in health by 2010, coinciding with the 'Healthy People' initiative, which sets the nation's health agenda every 10 years. For all the medical breakthroughs we have seen in the 20th century, we still see significant disparities in the medical conditions of racial groups in this country. What we have done through this initiative is to make a commitment – really, for the first time in the history of our government – to eliminate, not just reduce, some of the health disparities between majority and minority populations. Amazingly, certain segments of the country, particularly those who are isolated or economically deprived suffer from undernutrition while other segments of the country suffer from obesity and excesses. We have selected six areas to bring our efforts into focus: infant mortality; child and adult

immunizations; HIV/AIDS; cardiovascular disease; cancer screening and management; and diabetes.

Eliminating disparities is not a zero sum game. We are not taking anything from anyone when we ensure focus on the health needs of those most at risk. We are operating on the premise upon which the Public Health Service was founded 200 years ago: the entire nation benefits when we protect the health of those most vulnerable.

Using the best available science, my team and I will address each of these evolving priorities in the years ahead. By educating, motivating and mobilizing the American public, I hope to advance the quality of the nation's health and health care to confidently meet the challenges of the new millennium.

Conclusion

Finally, good nutrition takes time and planning. One of the most common enticements to unhealthy eating is fast food. It's accessible, it's fast and it's cheap. It's hard to get around that. Fresh fruits and vegetables, however, are the 'original fast food'. We have to get in the habit of grabbing an apple or banana to carry with us, snacking fresh carrots or cucumbers or broccoli – that's really fast food. And it's the right time-saving choice:

God's Minute

I have only just a minute
only sixty seconds in it
forced upon me, can't refuse it
didn't seek it, didn't choose it
but it's up to me to use it.
Must suffer if I lose it,
give account if I abuse it.
Just a tiny little minute
and yet eternity is in it.

[Unknown]

